

<https://www.cheshirefire.gov.uk/news-events/latest-news/20232024-budget-consultation>

2023/2024 Budget Consultation

Cheshire Fire Authority is launching a consultation on its precept (its share of council tax) for the forthcoming 2023/2024 financial year.

Cheshire Fire Authority is the publicly accountable body responsible for providing a fire and rescue service to the communities of Cheshire. The Authority has two main sources of income; grants from government (which make up around 33% of its budget) and through local council tax (which accounts for 67% of its budget). For the last financial year in 2022/23, the Authority had a total budget of £46.6m.

The Authority has a legal duty to set a balanced budget, which means matching its income with its outgoings. Its outgoings include paying staff wages, purchasing firefighting equipment, improving or maintaining premises and paying for things like energy and fuel.

In spite of the impact of austerity and the fact the Authority has not received capital funding (to pay for assets like fire stations) from the Government since 2014, it has in recent years been able to invest in its staff and its services through careful financial management and planning. This has allowed it to maintain equipment, invest in new technology, improve training and modernise its buildings. This has enabled Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service to become one of the most effective and efficient fire and rescue services in the country.

Unfortunately, the Authority is now facing further significant financial pressures, for example as a result of increases in the cost of energy and pay increases for staff (which are negotiated on a national basis and not always funded by the Government). Even after identifying a significant amount of savings, the Authority could be facing a funding gap of nearly £1m when it attempts to settle its 2023/24 budget; potentially more depending on the outcome of the pay dispute involving firefighters.

Fire and rescue authorities have been lobbying the Government in the hope that it will allow them to increase the amount that their council tax precept by more than has become the norm. In recent years increases have been limited to 2%. This level of increase in 2023/24 could mean that the Authority would struggle to maintain current levels of services in light of increases in costs.

The Government has now confirmed that it will allow authorities to increase their council tax precept by up to £5.00 per year for a Band D property. This would raise an additional £1.3m in funding compared to raising the precept by 1.99%, which would enable the Authority to maintain its current level of services and meet some of the pressures it faces from inflation and rising costs.

The impact of this increase on all council tax bands would be as follows:

- **Band A** - an increase of £3.33 per year, taking the annual precept from £54.99 to £58.32

- **Band B** - an increase of £3.89 per year, taking the annual precept from £64.15 to £68.04
- **Band C** - an increase of £4.44 per year, taking the annual precept from £73.32 to £77.76
- **Band D** - an increase of £5.00 per year, taking the annual precept from £82.48 to £87.48
- **Band E** - an increase of £6.11 per year, taking the annual precept from £100.81 to £106.92
- **Band F** - an increase of £7.22 per year, taking the annual precept from £119.14 to £126.36
- **Band G** - an increase of £8.33 per year, taking the annual precept from £137.47 to £145.80
- **Band H** - an increase of £10.00 per year, taking the annual precept from £164.96 to £174.96

Cllr Bob Rudd, Chair of Cheshire Fire Authority said: "Despite the impact of austerity and not receiving capital funding from Government since 2014, the Authority has in recent years been able to invest in its staff and services through careful financial management and planning.

"This has enabled the Authority to invest in new technology and equipment to improve the safety of firefighters and the community, and modernise its premises. This has included the development of a new operational training centre and replacement fire stations in Chester and Crewe (now underway). This made Cheshire one of the most effective and efficient fire and rescue services in the country."

"However we are now facing significant cost pressures and, while I understand this is a difficult ask we are making of local taxpayers, this increase would help us to maintain our services and continue to provide the excellent fire and rescue service that our community deserves."

The Fire Authority will consider its budget in February 2023 and at the meeting it will set its council tax precept. Before deciding what to do the Authority is keen to understand what people think. Please take a few moments to share your views on the Authority's proposal to increase its share of council tax. The survey, which is open until Monday 23 January 2023, can be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/CheshireFire2023Precept>